Professionalizing Practices

VALERIE CONNOR DISCUSSES HOW IN THE LAST 25 YEARS, THE IDEA OF THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF THE ARTIST HAS INCREASINGLY GONE HAND-IN-HAND WITH THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF ART PRACTICES.

Photo: Tom Lawlor.
Original caption: "Pavement Artist: Mary Burke, a student of the National College of Art and Design, chooses Pearse Street, Dublin, Landscape." Irish Times 27 October 1980.

THREE days before the photograph, above, of Mary Burke as an art student drawing on Pearse Street, was published on the front page of The Irish Times, a UNESCO plenary meeting held in Belgrade on the

research. This would appear to chime with the conspicuous publication of academic articles theorising 'relationality' (at least in the Anglophone social sciences) from the mid-90s onward[v]. An example

If artists are to play an increasing role in partnership schemes of one type or another with non-arts institutions, are there safeguards that will protect the artist's liberties while enabling partners to achieve their objectives? Is there a case for training artists and their non-arts collaborators so that both sides are more aware of and sensitive to each other's expectations and needs? viii

Anthony Everitt, The Creative Imperative:
A Report on Support for the Individual Artist, The Arts Council, 2000.

...it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (of art) declares itself with regard to social struggles – one should also ask how it effectively functions in these very struggles.ix

Slavoj Zizek, 'Democracy Unrealised', Documenta XI, 2002.

...emphasis on consensus, together with an aversion to confrontation, engenders apathy and disaffection with political participation ...confrontation between adversaries constitutes the "agonistic struggle," which I take to be the very condition of a vibrant democracy.x

Chantal Moulfe, 'Democracy Unrealised', Documenta XI, 2002.

In the Arts Councils' survey *The Creative Imperative*, artists' "liberties" are represented as being in conflict with the "objectives" of non-art partners. The remedying of this divergence between the artists' desire for freedom and the non-artists' need for results is presented as attainable through "training". This training is not exactly specified, but in the area of third-level art education, arts policy, and the professionalizing of the arts, new approaches to learning and training converge. Making an historical analysis of how the labour of the artist was re-conceptualised and re-evaluated in the USA after World War II, Helen Molesworth, argues that when codified "movements" like conceptualism and feminism critiqued the meaning of value in art, the

27th of October 1980. Following the meeting, The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Irish National Commission for UNESCO published the meeting's recommendations on the *The Status of the Artist*[vi]. A version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was incorporated into the document. The declaration includes as rights, the protection and regulation of working conditions, quality of life, and access to trade unions and social welfare for "everyone". In the main text of *The Status of the Artist*, under a section headed "Guiding Principles," member states were urged to act on and legislate for the need to include artists in the formulation of local and national cultural policies, stressing the importance of artists' contribution in their own society, as well as towards "world progress" in general. Furthermore, these principles guided that individuals, irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic status or birth should have the same opportunities to acquire and develop the skills necessary for the complete development and exercise of their artistic talents, to obtain employment, and to exercise their profession without discrimination. In the previous year, The Arts Council had already published a survey of the *Living and Working Conditions of Artists in Ireland*, which outlined artists' vulnerability to fluctuations in their immediately art-related income, a compromising reliance on discretionary social welfare, a lack of protection through trade union or professional representation, the impossibility of providing for a pension, the elusiveness of home mortgage approval, and the need to take up "other jobs – most commonly serving in bars but also as teachers, bouncers, labourers and so on."[vii]

Other reports commissioned by the Arts Council include *Research into Support for the Individual Artist* (1998)[viii] and *The Creative Imperative: A Report on Support for the Individual Artist* (2000), co-commissioned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The latter marks an interval of 20 years since *The Status of the Artist* was published, and like all intermediary reports its findings show that poverty continues to be a primary problem for all artists but the very few. Similarly consistent is a reported conflict between the freedoms of the individual artist and the "instrumentalised" objectives of partners with "social priorities" that subordinate artists' "aesthetic concerns," and lead to work of "lesser quality."[ix] It is clear that by the late-1990s the citizenship of the artist has become a focus in policy related

of this critical approach is the examination of how consume izens are socialised to understand economic and material concerns as tangible and part of the public culture, while relational factors are intangibles, are private, and not part of the public culture.

In 2005, the 2001-2006 Arts Plan having been set aside, the current Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon is currently soliciting 'public opinion' and interest from the 'arts community' as part of its research toward a new development strategy for the arts, which, once again, will include a review of the relationship between policy, resourcing, evaluation, and 'the individual artist'. For my part, I believe it is extremely important that the idea of 'the individual artist' be rigorously debated (again and again) and tested not only in terms of thinking anew about how the value-laden notion of genius underwrites the usage of 'excellence' as a key criterion of evaluation and legitimation in the parlance of the arts 'sector' but also in terms of lifting the concept of the individual out of its liberal history and rethinking its ideological baggage.

Delivering a presentation for the Civil Arts Inquiry a couple of years ago, the artist Pavel Büchler was introduced as preferring to describe his practice as the making of artworks which were "politicised by their context", rather than as "political works". His comments reflect how changing economies change the conditions for art. Büchler proposed that we live in a world no longer characterised by communities but by interdependent industries and economic "sectors", not by the diversity of roles, but by diversification of means, not by "useful work" but by the criteria of "competitive advantage", and "not by the distribution of surplus but by overproduction, excess, and redundancy."[x] How the language the arts "sector" is ideologically underwritten is illustrated by the arts councils' *The Creative Imperative* report on the artist. The report states that any government concerned with fostering voluntarism and community engagement will recognise an important role for the arts, through a "vigorous 'third sector'," characterised by civic participation and the coming together of citizens in autonomous clubs, societies, and associations"[xi]. The report further defers to the 1980 UNESCO definition of culture that details the spiritual, material, intellectual, and the emotional as essential components of civil society.

location of labour in art practice also changed. Bolstered by the de-materialisation of the art object and the "professionalization" of art departments, "artists continued to undermine the significance of technical skill" just as "contradictory ideas emerged about the teaching of art." On "the one hand, the idea arose that art could not be systematically taught," and on the other, "there was a consensus that art could be learned and that it was acquired in large measure by being around artists and listening to them talk. This 'talk' took place in the form of the 'crit', the guest artist lecture, and the phenomenon of the studio visit, all of which signalled a significant break with traditional academic art training."

Of types of artists listed in *The Creative Imperative*, one stands out that sheds light on how the professional status of the artist is formalised by the institutionalisation of art practices – even a practice that historically stems for a large part from a mistrust of institutions. The report recommends opening up awards in the Republic to "community artists".[xii] The formalising of educational qualifications in community arts is the logical outcome of this. But this rightly well intentioned action can well end up legislating for the further marginalising of creative and intellectual work that does not get done within a publicly recognised and accountable framework. A similar but apposite conundrum is central to issues of ownership of research undertaken in third level colleges. Where the 'research' is also an artists' 'practice' (practice-based research even?), there is an inevitable intervention into such practice because it is of rhetorical value to the institution and, logically, public institutions will shape their rhetoric to promote institutional values. Molesworth also links the use of non-object based art made by academically trained artists and the use of increasingly professionalized language to the appearance of "similar transformations in other forms of production (of both knowledge and objects) from the university to the corporate boardroom, as post-war culture at large came to be dominated by the logic of the management and service sectors of the economy."[xiii]

In the editorial section 'Career Development' in the March/April issue of The Visual Artists' News Sheet, Constance Short contributed the essay, *Artist in Society.* Short wrote about the encroachment of academics into art spaces and opportunities supported by public and state monies: "Our publicly funded galleries are too full of the work of academics. Good though some of them may be." She added that the same academics have "the major international exhibitions sown up as well." Driving her argument are core misgivings about academics' having both the "time to politic and their academic salaries," with the result that "they don't have to sell (but that is never stated)," and that ultimately such academics create an unreal image of the artist[xiii]. The academics Short has taken issue with may be generally Greenbergian formalist types or Royal Hibernian Academicians, or, more likely, they are teaching staff in art colleges and universities. Short's sentiments are not unique and have echoes in recent remarks by Brian Maguire on selling and practice[xiv]. However, Short makes a locally complex and generally contested history of art practice visible, which can lead to an impossible dichotomy: that an artist's labour may be alternately constructed as 'good' or 'bad' depending on whether an artist's labour is identified with material art objects (things) or with the dematerialisation of the art object (ideas, relational exchanges). So it is that the professional status of the artist is always ideologically inflected at the moment of its articulation, as Molesworth's analysis shows.

Academics have also taken some flack in Claire Bishop's recent appraisal of the rise of 'relational aesthetics' when she writes that: "Many academics in Britain and the US seem reluctant to move on from the politicized agendas and intellectual battles of 1980s art (indeed, for many, of 1960s art), and condemn everything from installation art to ironic painting as a depoliticised celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle." [xv] Furthermore, Helen Molesworth observes that the "much noted eclecticism of 1990s art practice appears to have been countered only by a steady fascination with and revival of art from the 1970s."[xvi] Bishop urges that it is worth bearing in mind "since the 1970s, older avant-garde rhetorics of opposition and transformation have been frequently replaced by strategies of complicity," and that what matters is not the complicity

currently theorising the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. Their association with Documenta 11 brings their work very immediately into the realm of broad art discourse. Why? Zizek effectively asserts the need for "a theory (of art)" to make its complicity with power apparent and draws attention to the fact that dominant ideologies tend to be invisible not visible. Mouffe warns that the privileging of consensus over the "adversarial model of politics" and the "integrative role that conflict plays in modern democracy" can only end in battles between non-negotiable moral values.

In Slavoj Zizek's opinion "the first myth to be debunked is that of the diminishing role of the state. What we are witnessing today is a shift in its functions: while partially withdrawing from its welfare obligations, the state is strengthening its apparatuses in other domains of social regulation,"[xxiv] In the arts councils' report *Research into Support for the Individual Artist,* jointly commissioned in 1998, the authors write that in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, artists are "living on the edge," and that social and economic policies "which change the rules of benefit or the balance between part time and full time employment" are identified as being perhaps the things which affect artists "even more" than arts awards.[xxv] By 2000, both arts council's in Ireland were told that "the majority of artists with whom it has contact appear to live either in poverty or in conditions which reflect neither their status nor the public and critical acclaim generated by their work within the international platform of the contemporary arts...it is not unknown for even prominent artists to rely on the goodwill of their local social welfare officer to interpret the nature of their livelihood so as to allow them to continue to draw the dole." [xxvi]

By contrast, consider Damien Hirst, interviewed a couple of years ago by Francesco Bonami, when asked, "Could you stop being an artist?." Hirst responds:"I know how to make the perfect artwork, how to be a perfect artist, but I can't do it, I'm too arrogant, all artists are." He continues to relate art to life as follows: "If you are an artist, you spend a lot of your life involved with something which has nothing to do with life... art is brilliant, it gives the vision of freedom, its classless." [xxvii] The inertia or painfully dispassionate nihilism of the student of art who subscribes to this or is burdened by the hopeless

indeed lies between, "the disciplinary constraints of art history and the elation of participation."[xxx] The signing-up to or assimilation by ideas about the utopian function of the artist (described under the rubric of 'relational aesthetics') should be examined especially closely for the invisibility and value of its rhetoric by artists. Likewise curators. Likewise critics. Likewise policy-makers. [xxxi]

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NOTES

i The Status of the Artist, Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon & the Irish National Commission for UNESCO, 1980. Available at http: //www.artscouncil.ie /library/downloads/The_Status_of_the_Artist.pdf (viewed on the 5th April, 2005).

ii Irish Marketing Surveys Ltd. Living and Working Conditions of Artists. Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, 1980, p.5. Available at http://www.artscouncil.ie/ library/downloads/Living_and_Working_Conditions_of_Artists.pdf (viewed on the 5th April, 2005).

iii Annabel Jackson Associates. Research into Support for the Individual Artist, Dublin: The Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1998.

iv Everitt, Anthony. "The Changing Context," in The Creative Imperative, Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2000. p.13.

v For a representative overview of the literature in Britain, see The Politics of Participation, edited by Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford. London: Sage, 1996.

vi Büchler, Pavel. Keynote Address during the Civil Arts Inquiry Symposium "The Role of Art Centres in Civil Society," in Document 09 (transcripts from Axis Arts Centre, March 2003). Dublin: City Arts Centre, 2003, p.73.

vii See, "The Changing Context," in Anthony Everitt's The Creative Imperative, Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2000, p.11

viii Anthony Everitt, "The Changing Context," in The Creative Imperative, Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2000. p.13.

ix Zizek, Slavoj. "The Prospects of Radical Politics Today," in Democracy Unrealised. Documenta: Platform 1, Okwui Enwezor, et al., (eds). Ostfildern: Matje Cantz, 2002, p.68.

x Mouffe, Chantal. "For an Agonistic Public Sphere," in Democracy Unrealised. Documenta: Platform 1, Enwezor, Okwui, et al. (eds). Ostfildern: Matje Cantz, 2002, pp.89-90.

xi Not only community artists, but: "traditional/folk artists and those working with popular cultural forms" as well.

xii See, Helen Molesworth's eponymously titled chapter in Work Ethic. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2003.

xiii Short, Constance. "Artist in Society," in The Visual Arts News Sheet, Issue 2, March/April 2005, p.12

xiv See, Brian Maguire remarking that: "In the early 1980s I began to work in a studio in Dublin. I supported this work by exhibiting in a gallery. This arrangement of trying to live from one's work was a more responsible approach than not working." From, "Notes on Practice," in An Outburst of Frankness. Sandy Fitzgerald (ed.). Dublin: Iasc/New Ireland, 2004, p.206

xv Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in October Vol. 110, Fall 2004, p.53.

xvi Molesworth, Helen. "House Work and Art Work," in October Vol. 92, Spring 2000, pp.71.

xvii Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in October Vol. 110, Fall 2004,

but how we receive it.[xvii] And in a similar vein, Benson remarked a few years ago that "in the 1960s and 70s and since then the very nature of what an artist is, the political economy that builds and supports and plays with and exploits and at the same time advances these, all of that has changed radically."[xviii] In this context, Bishop describes Nicolas Bourriaud's theorising of 'relational aesthetics' as a necessary but flawed attempt to make a critical framework for thinking about what artists were and did in the1990s.[xix] Nevertheless, she turns to the political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe and Mouffe's emphasis on the importance of social friction in order to get to the root of what she believes to be a troubling confusion about what social participation means in Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of 'relational aesthetics' developed in the 90s.[xx]

While 'academic' is not automatically synonymous with 'intellectual', it is well enough established that the one and the other are frequently used interchangeably. Therefore it is worth returning the projection of doubt cast on the value of intellectual labour (and, notably, the assignment of dissent to the private sphere) as it pops up in the *Preface to the Arts Community Education* committee report *Art and the Ordinary* (1989), where Ciarán Benson wrote how: "Publicly, one might continue to assert that there is a need for clear intellectual arguments which convincingly argue for changes and re-emphases in Irish cultural policy-making, and that this essay sets out such arguments; but privately one might wonder when the best intellectual arguments ever had decisive effect in matters of educational, social or cultural policy-making in Ireland, or anywhere else, for that matter."[xxi] It is notable that both Molesworth and Bishop (and October editorial board member, George Baker[xxii]), have identified the under-representation of women even in recent art histories of minimalism and most especially conceptualism. In relation to a different ethic at work in the feminist projects of women artists in the 60s and 70s, Molesworth explains that often "the overtly maintenance content of such works was read as being equivalent to their meaning." She added that: "What has not been fully appreciated are the ways in which this usually degraded content actually permits an engagement with questions of value and institutionality that critique the conditions of everyday life as well as art."[xxiii]

Slavoj Zizek, an academic whose background is in political philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, popular culture and art, has also run for public election. Chantal Mouffe, also an academic, is a political philosopher who advocates a radical democratic pluralism and is

m[illegible] equivalence of all stand-points is common and problematic in terms of the educational environment's supply of artists into civic life. However, Chatal Mouffe has theorised how an individual is constituted by an ensemble of "subject positions" but stresses that these are at turns made dominant or subordinate through social relations.[xxiv]

Elaborating on Mouffe's theory of "agonistic struggle," Claire Bishop declares the need for what she describes as relational antagonism. This, she argues, better provides for a mode of artistic experience that chimes with the "divided and incomplete subject of today" as opposed to the unified subject required by "relational aesthetics… as a pre-requisite for community-as-togtherness." On the appearance of harmony, Bishop remarks that this "relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one another."[xxv] The crux of this criticism signals how easily the 'interactivity' of relational art can imitate the illusion of participation. Crucially then, art and artists that produce falsely homogenising moments of social exchange ultimately celebrates accord at the cost of diminishing the cultural value of dissent. The risk is that some kind of transformational performativity conceptually drawn on by 'relational aesthetics' may only recreate simple social obedience, at best, and essentialist and moralising communities, at worst. Consider Chantal Mouffe's investigation into neo-conservatism in Europe.

A simple critique of professional status based on abstract values of excellence, genius and innovation, for example, do not serve the artist well. The exceptions only prove the rule. But neither is the status of the artist changed in any significant way through the uncritical adoption of re-visions of the artist as a utopian figure. However, if Bourriaud's acts of criticism, in writing or curating, are flawed, his ideas cannot be dismissed out of hand. They are engaged with re-thinking the artist as having actual agency in the world that involves a creative social imagination. In February, Bourriaud's Palais de Tokyo in Paris hosted the 'Emergency Biennale', an event organised to bring attention to Chechnya's conflict with Russia. Significantly, the Biennale was organised in collaboration with the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH). The rights based social contract that artists tacitly consent to in liberal democracies is central to the government of artists in democratically organised political communities. Perhaps the articulation of collaborative experience

p.71

xviii Benson, Ciaran. Introduction to the Civil Arts Inquiry Symposium, "The Role of Art Centres in Civil Society," in Document 09 (transcripts from the Axis Arts Centre, February, 2003). Dublin: City Arts Centre, 2003, p. 23

xix Nicolas Bourriaud is the Director of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, and was a guest speaker at Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane International Lecture Series in 2004. His books Relational Aesthetics and Postproduction were published, in English, in 2002.

xx Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in October Vol. 110, Fall 2004, p. 65.

xxi Benson, Ciarán. "Reflections on art, non-artists, and policy-making in Ireland," in Art and the Ordinary: The Report of the Arts, Community, Education Committee. Dublin: The Arts Council, 1989, p.16.

xxii George Baker precedes Claire Bishop's October article, and the subsequent articles which critique 'relational aesthetics' with an editorial piece.

xxiii Molesworth, Helen. "House Work and Art Work," in October Vol. 92, Spring 2000, pp.81-82.

xxiv Zizek, Slavoj. "The Prospects of Radical Politics Today," in Democracy Unrealised. Documenta: Platform 1, Okwui Enwezor, et al., (eds). Ostfildern: Matje Cantz, 2002 p.77.
xxv See Annabel Jackson Associates' Research into Support for the Individual Artist, Dublin: The Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1998, p.65 (my emphasis).

xxvi See the Terms of Reference, in Anthony Everitt's The Creative Imperative, Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2000, p.9

xxvii Bonami, Francesco. Interview with Damien Hirst, in The Exploded View of the Artist. Florence: Donilo Montanari, Exit and Zona Archives, 1997, p.117.

xxviii Mouffe, Chantal. "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in The Return of the Political, London: Verso, 1993, p.77.

xxix Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in October Vol. 110, Fall 2004, p.79.

xxx Murphy, Ailbhe. "The Fine Art of Floating Horses," in An Outburst of Frankness. Sandy Fitzgerald (ed.). Dublin: tasc/New Ireland, 2004, p.191.

xxxi Citing issues arising in Arts Council of England symposia held in 2003, Rhona Henderson notes how consensus can be the problem not the solution; see "Community Arts as Socially Engaged Art," in An Outburst of Frankness. Sandy Fitzgerald (ed.). Dublin: tasc/New Ireland, 2004, p.159.